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## Lantos' D.C. office is a living tribute to Wallenberg

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Jerusalem Post Service

WASHINGTON -- To walk into Rep. Tom Lantos' second floor office in the House Rayburn building is to be overwhelmed with stimuli.

A massive promotional poster for the Academy Award- winning documentary film "The Last Days" greets visitors. The film, which depicts Hitler's drive to exterminate Hungarian Jewry in the waning days of World War II, features the San Mateo Democratic legislator, the only Holocaust survivor to ever be elected to Congress.

The cramped four-room chamber is filled with the bustle of aides shifting around, including his petite wife, Annette, who helps him develop many of his initiatives. Lantos knew Annette as a child in Hungary before the war.

He refers frequently and proudly to his 17 grandchildren, the oldest of whom is currently completing a master's degree in Jewish studies at Oxford University. A self-described secular Jew, but at the same time one immensely proud of his heritage, Lantos refuses to talk about his children's religious affiliation. Both daughters married Mormons.

In his personal office a massive map of the world stretches across one wall behind a model of a 19th-century ship. The map is a fitting symbol of Lantos' passion for international affairs. He is now the ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Committee.

Lantos' passion for Israel is evident from the lithographs of Jerusalem scenes that line another wall and the colorful Israeli-made pottery that is used to serve coffee to guests.

His dog Gigi roams freely throughout the office, stumbling slightly with a front-paw injury, and is an instant reminder of his and Annette's advocacy on behalf of animals.

But above all, the office is a living tribute to Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who rescued tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews, including Annette. High above one of the doorways is a green street sign that reads "Raoul Wallenberg Way" and images of him abound.

"Wallenberg has taught me really the most important things I've ever learned," Lantos said. "That you've got to rise above yourself, your family, your group, and to have broader goals. Wallenberg was a Lutheran Swede who came to Budapest to save Hungarian Jews. He solved a problem while he had no connection to it except his common humanity."

Dressed in a casual, gray warm-up suit, Lantos discusses how his personal history has affected his actions as a legislator. Today his commitment to free and open democratic societies is fueling a plethora of personal initiatives, including a drive to keep the 2008 Olympics out of China.

In recent weeks he has also proposed dramatic plans to restructure U.S. aid and support to Middle Eastern governments. Among the legislation Lantos has pledged to introduce are bills to prohibit U.S. military assistance to Lebanon unless Beirut deploys its troops to its border with Lebanon, to phase out all military assistance to Egypt, and to prohibit all U.S. aid from any country that joins a renewed Arab boycott against Israel.

He has also co-sponsored a letter to President Bush calling on him to re-evaluate the U.S. relationship with the Palestinian Authority in light of the Palestinian violence against Israel.

Many of his goals may seem unachievable at a time when the Bush administration is striving to break the popular perception in the Arab world that the U.S. is biased toward Israel. But Lantos hopes to use his position to focus attention on these initiatives.

"I'm not a religious person," he says. "But it is sort of a near miracle to me that at my stage in life given my very unpromising background, I should now be able to function as the top Democrat on the House International Relations Committee."

Beyond being the co-chair and founder of the Congressional Task Force Against Anti-Semitism, Lantos is better-known as one of the loudest advocates for human rights. In the early 1980s, Lantos and his wife founded the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. Among the disparate causes he has fought for is freedom for Tibet from Chinese rule. Lantos has also worked to help fleeing Christians emigrate from the former Soviet Union.

Brought up with a passion for international affairs, Lantos remembers crouching over a barely audible radio to listen to wartime broadcasts on the BBC banned by the Nazi occupiers. Now, as then, Lantos spends almost six hours daily devouring books, journals and newspapers.

"Really the only reason I wouldn't enjoy dropping dead tomorrow is because

there's still so many books I want to read," Lantos says.

For 33 years Lantos worked as a professor before a brief stint as foreign policy adviser to Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.) in 1979.

Since beginning his new job, Lantos has convened meetings with fellow Democrats on the International Relations Committee to formulate strategy and hear ideas. He frequents meetings of the Jewish caucus. But overall, he tends to avoid close relationships with his fellow legislators and goes his own way, colleagues and lobbyists say.

"He's very much a loner," says one former pro-Israel lobbyist who worked closely with Lantos in the past. "While so many of his colleagues play tennis or paddleball with one another, Tom is a swimmer. He doesn't have the comradeship."

Says Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.): "I think that Tom Lantos is one of the smarter members of Congress, particularly when it comes to international relations. Tom doesn't pull any punches. He just says what he thinks."

Much of what he thinks is delivered in powerful extemporaneous remarks before congressional committees and audiences, like the one he delivered to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee last month. He outlined many of his priorities regarding the Middle East in a powerful off-the-cuff speech in which he lambasted Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat for having "walked away from an incredibly generous offer without making any counteroffer and resorting to preplanned, premeditated violence."

Regarding Lebanon, Lantos admits that his drive to eliminate military aid to Lebanon, a paltry sum, is primarily symbolic.

"We pretend, and Lebanon pretends, that Lebanon is a sovereign country," he says. "We know that the Syrian influence is overwhelming and the Lebanese certainly know that. But I am outraged by the anti-Israel drivel coming from high-ranking Lebanese public officials and I want to make the point that they are a country [whose] military today has one potential function which has value, and that is to seal the Lebanese-Israeli border so there is peace and security following the withdrawal of Israeli forces."

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